

# Family Support: An Essential Component for Effective Preschool Programs

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## ▼ Abstract

Throughout North America there is a growing consensus that investing in high-quality, universal, pre-kindergarten programs would be wise. Consequently, pre-kindergarten programs have grown exponentially. A key factor underlying public support is the popular dissemination of three landmark studies: the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Carolina Abecedarian Project and the Chicago Child Parent Centers. Each of these demonstrations is renowned for its achievement of extraordinary savings in public expenditures and success in children's long term social or educational attainment. It is anticipated that an "educational" investment in early years can stem the tide of educational failure among the poor. This hope, we posit, is less likely to be fulfilled if the newly expanding early learning programs neglect the family supports that were imbedded in the landmark studies; the "education" aspects of "preschool" are necessary but not sufficient to replicate the desired outcomes. If we are to achieve comparable results, then the preschool programs must have components which are reasonably similar to those studies. As standards for preschool are enhanced, family support must be built into expectations for teachers, state regulations and program requirements. In this way, we give children the best chance for a more productive future.

Throughout North America there has been a renewed interest in early education. There is growing consensus among key education and business leaders that investing in high-quality, universal, pre-kindergarten programs would be significant and wise. A series of longitudinal studies have shown that early education provides a strong foundation for the development of human capital as well as for economic growth.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, many policymakers see early education as a means to close the achievement gap between poor and middle-class children.

Consequently, state-funded pre-kindergarten programs have grown exponentially in the United States. For example, by 2001, 43 states have been offering some form of preschool program, most often by expanding their public schools to serve three and four year olds. The quality and structure of these programs show “remarkable variability” in terms of who is being served, eligibility criteria, hours of service, program standards, teacher qualifications and other criteria.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect ongoing and significant expansion of these public preschools as they acquire higher levels of public demand and political will.

Much of the growth in preschool has been based on broad and popular dissemination of research results about early education. Added together, these studies have found not only that early education promotes “school readiness,” but that it also

prepares children for greater financial and personal success in their adult lives.<sup>3</sup>

Three of the most commonly cited studies used to build public support for preschool are the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Carolina Abecedarian Project and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers. Each of these studies is renowned for the achievement of extraordinary results for children:

- The landmark High/Scope Perry Preschool Program demonstrated an impact so powerful that the effects of high-quality early care and education on low-income three and four year olds are evident 40 years later. Middle-aged adults who participated in the preschool program in their early years have higher earnings, are more likely to hold a job, have committed fewer crimes, and are more likely to have graduated from high school. The most recent study, reporting on participants’ life situation through age 40, documented an economic return to society of more than \$17 for every tax dollar invested in the original early care and education program.<sup>4</sup>
- The Carolina Abecedarian Project began service delivery in infancy with child-centered, full-day, year-round early education services. At age 21, the long-term impact included reduced numbers of teenage births, delayed first birth, reduced rates of marijuana use, and increased skilled employment and/or higher education. Mothers whose children participated in the program achieved higher educa-

- 1 Campbell, F.A., Famey, C.T., Pungello, E.P., Sparling, J. and Miller-Johnson, S., Early childhood education: Young adult outcomes from the Abecedarian project, 2002. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6, 42-47. Reynolds, Arthur J., *Success in Early Intervention: The Chicago Child-Parent Centers*, Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. Schweinhart, Lawrence J., *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40: Summary, Conclusions, and Frequently Asked Questions*, Ypsilanti, Mich.: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2004. Also available online at [www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/PerryAge40SumWeb.pdf](http://www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/PerryAge40SumWeb.pdf)
- 2 See *Early Developments*, NCEDE Pre-Kindergarten Study. Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. Volume 9 #1, Spring 2005.
- 3 Washington, V., Johnson, V. and McCracken, J., *School readiness in Massachusetts: A report of the Governor's Commission on School Readiness*. Boston, Massachusetts: Office of Child Care Services and Department of Education, 2001.
- 4 Schweinhart, Lawrence J., *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40: Summary, Conclusions, and Frequently Asked Questions*, Ypsilanti, Mich.: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2004. See also Barnett, W. S., *Lives in the balance: Age-27 benefit-cost analysis of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program* (Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 11). Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press, 1996. Schweinhart, L. J., Barnes, H. V., & Weikart, D. P., *Significant benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 27* (Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 10). Ypsilanti: High/Scope Press, 1993.
- 5 Campbell, F.A., Famey, C.T., Pungello, E.P., Sparling, J. and Miller-Johnson, S., Early childhood education: Young adult outcomes from the Abecedarian project, *Applied Developmental Science*, 6, 42-47, 2002. Campbell, F. A., Pungello, E. P., Miller-Johnson, S., Burchinal, M. and Ramey, C. T., The Development of Cognitive and Academic Abilities: Growth Curves from an Early Childhood Educational Experiment. *Developmental Psychology*, 37, 231-242, 2002. Ramey, C. T., Campbell, F. A., Burchinal, M., Skinner, M. L., Gardner, D. M. and Ramey, S. L., Persistent effects of early intervention on high-risk children and their mothers, 2000. *Applied Developmental Science*, 4, 2-14.

tional and employment status than mothers whose children were not in the program. These results were especially pronounced for teen mothers.<sup>5</sup>

- Chicago Child-Parent Center Program participation has been significantly associated with higher levels of school achievement into adolescence, with higher levels of consumer skills, enhanced parent involvement in children's education, lower rates of grade retention and special education, lower rates of early school dropout and with lower rates of delinquent behavior.<sup>6</sup>

What were the elements that made these programs so successful? Are public preschools and early learning services on track to achieve these remarkable outcomes?

In this paper we posit that a neglected feature of the newly expanding early learning programs is the family support components that were imbedded in the landmark studies. Instead, public programs stress "early education" without the intensive family support that was essential to program success. We argue that the "education" aspects alone are necessary but not sufficient to replicate the outcomes of the High/Scope Perry Preschool, Abecedarian and Chicago Child-Parent projects.

### Early education

A school reform framework is no doubt a primary motivator for increased public acceptance of early learning services. As the school accountability requirements have grown, including those of the U.S. federal "No Child Left Behind" legislation, there is concern that too many children fail to meet mandated educational standards of public education. It is anticipated that an "educational" investment in early years can stem the tide of educational failure and promote school success.

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Yet, even the narrowly defined "teaching-learning" aspects of early learning services have not yet attained a satisfactory level of performance. According to the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCELD) pre-kindergarten study, findings about state-funded pre-kindergarten are "somewhat disappointing" and reflect a very uneven system of care. These early results show that classroom quality is lower than would be anticipated, and that the impact for children may be compromised. For example, in these classrooms, time was absorbed in routine activities; children had relatively little adult contact and spent relatively large

amounts of time "waiting" rather than in focused instruction or appropriate conceptual or skill-based activities. The researchers believed that assessment results for children might have been greater if all programs were of higher quality—or of a quality comparable to that found in the landmark studies of early education.

One measure of classroom quality is teacher qualifications.

In the NCELD study, the classrooms where teachers did not have a college degree tended to have a higher proportion of children from poor backgrounds. Minimum teacher's qualifications range from a Child Development Associate's credential to a bachelor's degree with a state teaching certificate. In contrast, in the Perry preschool classrooms, teachers had bachelor's degrees and certification in education.

Another measure of quality is the teacher-child ratios. NCELD found adult-child ratios ranging from 1:6 to 1:10 in group sizes from 15 to 24 children. High/Scope Perry Preschool Project teachers each served five to six children. The Chicago Child-Parent program had teacher-preschooler ratios of 2:17.

6 Reynolds, Arthur J., *Success in Early Intervention: The Chicago Child-Parent Centers*, Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. Reynolds, A. J. Temple, J. A., Robertson, D. L. and Mann, E. A., Long-term effects of an early childhood intervention on educational achievement and juvenile arrest: A 15-year follow-up of low-income children in public schools. *JAMA*. 2001; 285:2339-2346. Reynolds, A. J., Miedel, W. T. and Mann, E. A., Innovation in early intervention for children in families with low incomes: Lessons from the Chicago Child-Parent Centers. *Young Children*. 2000; 55:84-88.

## Family support is not optional

As disturbing as the early academic results are for pre-kindergarten programs, we are encouraged that the challenge is recognized. It is not at all clear that a similar recognition of the necessity of family support currently exists.

Research has demonstrated consistently that the most effective child development programs work with children *and their families*. Parents play a crucial role in their children's success. And, importantly, the oft-cited landmark studies did not consist entirely of an academic program for children. Rather, these very successful programs offered family supports such as home visits and parent education—early learning services that are too rarely discussed in the current political clamor for preschool.

A hopeful public is advised about the great investment value of early education and its potential both to yield savings in social costs and to change the life trajectories of vulnerable children. In large measure the public is not told that these results were achieved with family support efforts in partnership with academic training.

More research is needed to investigate the duration, intensity, scope and coverage of family support services now being offered to preschoolers. According to program administrators in the NCEDL pre-kindergarten study, at least 80 percent of programs provided services for children with special needs, conducted developmental assessments of children and provided meals for children. Between 50 and 79 percent of programs offered parenting education or family literacy programs, transportation and health care or social services, sometimes offered collaboratively with other agencies. Less than half the programs provided on-site family case workers, before- or after-school care or extended-year (summer and holiday) care.

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In our experience, it is doubtful that more than a handful of states have invested heavily in parent-focused early learning services on the order of the High/Scope Perry Preschool, Abecedarian and Chicago Child-Parent studies. Indeed public preschool is notable by its general lack of intentionally designed parent involvement and comprehensive services.

To illustrate this assertion, few would question the claim that Head Start programs generally include a much higher level of parent involvement and family support than most state-funded or private preschools. Head Start requires two

home visits and two parent-teacher meetings yearly and supports parents in getting health insurance, medical care, education for themselves and social services. Parents also play a key role in governing local programs. Moreover, Head Start parents have been found to have an exceptionally high degree of satisfaction with, and commitment to, the program.<sup>7</sup>

Over several decades, parental support has been a pivotal and strategic force in the ongoing political survival and success of Head Start. Yet, even with these supports at levels surpassing public preschools, and even with its demonstrated successes for children, Head Start research has not demonstrated the consistent, long-term impact that other landmark studies have shown. Inconsistent quality implementation is often cited as the cause, suggesting that the definition and standards for family support must be clarified and better disseminated. Indeed, a recently released study indicated that the program had a “modest” impact on children’s cognitive development, emotional and social well-being, and health.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, family support is essential to the success of preschool initiatives. In the landmark studies, family support was closely tied to the program design.

7 Greene, S. and Washington, V., *Head Start 2010: Fulfilling the Promise*. Arlington, Virginia: National Head Start Association, 2000.

8 Westat et al., *Head Start Impact Study First Year Findings*. Washington DC: Administration for Children and Families. May 2005.

- The High/Scope Perry Preschool program, for example, offered two years of weekly home visits, along with high-quality preschool.
- The Abecedarian Project provided biweekly visits from a home-school resource teacher (HSRT). In the school-age phase, families were assigned a HSRT who served as a liaison between the school and home for the first three years that the child attended public school. To involve parents in their children's education, homeroom teachers developed individualized curriculum packets, based on the needs of each child. The HSRTs delivered the curriculum packets to parents every two weeks and encouraged parents to use the packets with their children for 15 minutes each day. HSRTs sought continuous feedback from the parents regarding the curriculum packets and the activities they contained. Classroom teachers and parents also met regularly.
- Chicago Child-Parent Centers included a paraprofessional home visitor for each center. Centers also featured a parent resource room staffed by a full-time parent-resource teacher. This teacher supervised the multi-faceted parent program, which included participating in parent room activities, volunteering in the classroom, attending school events and enrolling in educational courses for personal development. A school-community representative coordinated outreach activities, including resource mobilization, home visitation, and enrollment of children "most in need." Health and nutrition services included health screening, speech therapy, shared nursing services and free breakfasts and lunches. Further, a comprehensive school-age program supported children's transition to elementary school. Parent involvement was one of three factors specifically linked to the success of the Child-Parent Center children, as measured by their increased likelihood of graduating from high school and their decreased likelihood of experiencing grade retention or placement in a special education classroom.

## Conclusion

If we are to achieve results comparable to these three landmark studies, preschool programs must have components which are reasonably similar to those studies. Otherwise, we must reconsider whether the current adaptations and implementations of public preschool will have the capacity to achieve their intended results for poor children.

Currently, there appears to be little effort to design public preschool programs in the comprehensive manner akin to the designs of landmark studies. If state-funded pre-kindergarten programs are intended to produce the significant gains of the High/Scope Perry Preschool, Abecedarian and Chicago Child-Parent Center projects, their academic quality standards must improve significantly. Equally important, they must begin to design and implement family support initiatives as essential companions to the "school work." Arthur Reynolds, author of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers study published in 2001, believes the main reason for the crime-reduction effect seen in this population was the strong family support component. He states, "If it were just an educational program, you wouldn't find the social outcomes that we've found."<sup>9</sup>

There are several factors which may affect public capacity and willingness to design more effective early education services. As was pointed out in *The 2004 Preschool Yearbook*, published by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), funding for state-funded programs has failed to keep pace with enrollment. Although total enrollment rose, spending per preschool student fell.<sup>10</sup> This instability of funding will be a barrier to the implementation of family support services. In addition, it will be essential to better inform the public about what family support is and why it is important.

In conclusion, we agree with the researchers of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project who argue that results simi-

9 Arthur Reynolds, quoted in Strauss, Jessica, *Hard Data Shows Family Support Works*, in *America's Family Support Magazine*, Summer 2001. November 11, 2005

10 Barnett, Steven, Hustedt, Jason T., Robin, Kenneth B. and Schulman, Karen L., *The State of Preschool: 2004 State Preschool Yearbook*, New Brunswick, N.J.: National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), 2004.

11 Schweinhart, L. J., *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40: Summary, Conclusions and Frequently Asked Questions*. Ypsilanti, Michigan High/Scope Educational Research Foundation 2004.

lar to theirs can be expected of any Head Start, state preschool, or child care program whose program follows the model that High/Scope coordinated and then studied.<sup>11</sup> The bar is set and it is achievable for every child. As standards for preschool are enhanced, family support must be built into program requirements, expectations for teachers and state regulations. In this way, we give children the best chance for a more productive future.

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